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AUTHOR Rasmussen, Robert T.
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ABSTRACT

A key factor in the decline of Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores (a factor that has been overlooked) is the concurrent decline in the availability of textbooks. The simultaneous decline of both SAT scores and textbooks suggests a strong cause-and-effect relationship. A recent study by the Ohio Education Association indicated that there are frequently not enough textbooks (if any) for an entire class and that many of the textbooks were published in the 1950's. If such findings are representative of the nation, it is clear that students are being shortchanged. Very little money is currently being spent on textbook purchases; however, supplying students with adequate textbooks would seem to be a cost-efficient way to help them improve their test scores. (DC)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

by

Robert T. Rasmussen

Kids can't learn without books

ONE KEY FACTOR that contributed to the much-publicized decline in Scholastic Aptitude Test (S.A.T.) scores during the last two decades has been overlooked: Throughout the period of test-score decline, schools have experienced a matching decline in the availability of textbooks for students.

During the years 1966-81, according to data from the Association of American Publishers (A.A.P.), the average per-pupil expenditure for textbooks and other printed instructional materials declined from approximately $30 per pupil (in 1980 dollars) to $20.70 per pupil—a drop of approximately 30 percent. S.A.T. scores in mathematics, meanwhile, after holding relatively steady for 17 years, started to decline in the mid-1960s before reaching a low of 466 in 1980. A similar pattern exists for S.A.T. verbal scores: After holding relatively steady at approximately 470, test scores in the mid-1960s began a drop that fell to 424 by 1980. (S.A.T. scores in 1981 remained constant—the first time since 1963 that the scores did not decline.)

Although it's hard to say just how much the drop in textbook expenditures has to do with the decline in S.A.T. scores, the simultaneous declines suggest a strong cause-and-effect relationship. That students undoubtedly have less access to books and printed material today than did students 15 or 20 years ago simply cannot be dismissed. Face it: Kids can't learn without books. And in too many places, students apparently are limited in their access to textbooks and supplementary materials.

Robert T. Rasmussen, a former vice-president of the Association of American Publishers, is associate professor of education at the C.W. Post Center of Long Island University.

Evidence: During the 1950s and '60s—when school enrollments were booming—textbook publishers experienced a static market. Then in 1968, sales declined sharply. Leaving aside the question of *why* sales declined, it should be obvious that the situation is even bleaker today, when enrollments in most school systems are falling, not climbing. In the past two years, some publishers have reported that the sales of textbooks are the worst in 20 years. What's more, textbooks evidently are not being replaced by other types of media. Studies by the Association of Media Producers—compared with A.A.P. figures—report an even *more* serious decline in the sale to schools of films, tapes, and other types of audio-visual materials. The bottom line: Your school budgets in the last two decades have been increasing at record rates, but the sale of instructional materials—including books—has not kept pace.

For an indication of the impact this shortage of textbooks has had on schools, teachers, and students, consider the report of a recent study conducted by the Ohio Education Association. The Ohio group surveyed teachers throughout the state, asking them about the availability of textbooks for their classes, the date the texts were published, and the impact of any shortage on their teaching methods. Teachers frequently reported that not enough textbooks were available for an entire class. One teacher said 20 books had to be shared by 120 students. Others reported no textbooks for some classes. Still other teachers said their students' books were out of date or had to be shared by several students. When asked about the age of textbooks, many teachers said textbooks used in their classes were published in the 1950s.

Of course, teachers said a substantial impact of the textbook shortage was that homework assignments frequently were not possible (because students couldn't take books home). Teachers also said the lack of books meant they had to spend many hours preparing worksheets to be mimeographed at school and handed out to students.

If conditions reported by teachers in Ohio are indicative of a problem nationwide (and I believe they are), then it's clear that students are being short-changed. Consequently, the impact on S.A.T. scores—and on student achievement in general—is that students today are perhaps not as well-read or well-prepared for tests as were their counterparts of 20 years ago.

Currently, A.A.P. says, approximately two-thirds of 1 percent of a typical school system budget is spent on textbooks and instructional materials. [Information obtained by the Educational Research Service, Inc.—and published in THE EXECUTIVE EDUCATOR's September article *Use the 1982 school budget index to get a fix on finances*—suggests that approximately 2 percent of a school system's budget is spent on texts.] Regardless of the exact figure, the fact remains that the amount of money spent on textbooks, in my opinion, is too small. And worse: No one seems to know why so little money is spent on textbooks.

Whatever the reasons, supplying students with adequate texts seems a logical way to improve instructional programs. And buying better books also is bound to be a cost-efficient way for you to help students improve their scores on standardized tests. In fact, the relationship between the availability of textbooks and the quality of learning seems so obvious that it's easy to see how—during a number of years—the matter might have come to be overlooked. It's time to regain our perspective. ■

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